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Seventy-first year

Provisional

7772nd meeting

Thursday, 15 September 2016, 10 a.m.

New York

President: Mr. McCully/Mr. Van Bohemen (New Zealand)

Members:	Angola.....	Mr. Gimolieca
	China.....	Mr. Shen Bo
	Egypt.....	Mr. Aboulatta
	France.....	Mr. Delattre
	Japan.....	Mr. Bessho
	Malaysia.....	Mr. Ibrahim
	Russian Federation.....	Mr. Churkin
	Senegal.....	Mr. Ciss
	Spain.....	Mr. González de Linares Palou
	Ukraine.....	Mr. Yelchenko
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland ..	Mr. Rycroft
	United States of America.....	Ms. Power
	Uruguay.....	Mr. Bermúdez
	Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of).....	Mr. Arcia Vivas

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to warmly welcome the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. Ban Ki-moon, and give him the floor.

The Secretary-General: I should like to thank Foreign Minister McCully for organizing this meeting at a crucially important time. Allow me to begin by wishing all Muslims who celebrated this week Eid Adha Mubarak.

I also want to reiterate my hope for the swift and full recovery of former Israeli President Shimon Peres, who has been tireless in seeking peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Twenty-three years ago, almost to the day, the first Oslo Accord was signed between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. Unfortunately, we are further than ever from its goals. The two-State solution is at risk of being replaced by a one-State reality of perpetual violence and occupation. Despite warnings by the international community and the region, leaders on both sides have failed to take the difficult steps needed for peace.

Just yesterday, militants in Gaza fired yet another rocket into Israel, which I condemn. Israel fired four missiles at targets in Gaza in response. Once again, I reiterate that such attacks and the response they elicit do not serve the cause of peace. In the past two weeks alone, plans have been advanced for yet another 463 housing units in four settlements in Area C of the occupied West Bank. Official Israeli data shows that the second quarter of 2016 had the highest number of construction starts in three years. The decades-long policy that has settled more than 500,000 Israelis in Palestinian territory is diametrically opposed to the creation of a Palestinian State.

Regrettably, the reporting period also saw the continuation of statements by both sides that only perpetuate an environment of mistrust. I am disturbed

by a recent statement by Israel's Prime Minister portraying those who oppose settlement expansion as supporters of ethnic cleansing. This is unacceptable and outrageous. Let me be absolutely clear — settlements are illegal under international law. The occupation, stifling and oppressive, must end. The international community, including the Security Council and the Middle East Quartet, universally views the expansion of settlements as an obstacle to peace.

I continue to be appalled that Palestinian parties choose to praise despicable acts, such as the 1972 terrorist attack against Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. The glorification of terror is disgraceful and the Palestinian leadership must put an end to it.

As Palestinians prepare for the first local elections in over 10 years, we see increasing threats to the electoral process and the credibility of elected institutions, including politically motivated attacks and a growing number of questionable rulings. I am particularly concerned by last week's decision of the Palestinian High Court to suspend all preparations while deliberations continue on a petition to cancel elections. Local elections in the West Bank and Gaza, if held in line with international standards, could provide an important renewal of Palestinian democracy and a first step towards advancing national unity. Regional efforts to encourage reconciliation and strengthen moderate political forces can also play a positive role.

Turning to Gaza, there has been progress in the two years since the 2014 ceasefire. Houses, hospitals, schools and critical infrastructure have been repaired thanks to generous donors and good cooperation among Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the United Nations. At the same time, 65,000 people remain displaced. More assistance is needed to rebuild nearly 5,000 destroyed houses. More coordination is required to accelerate ongoing reconstruction. Since 2014, the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism has facilitated the entry of more than 1.5 million tons of construction material and helped significantly to boost imports into Gaza, positively impacting the private sector.

Israel has legitimate security concerns with regard to the smuggling or seizure of materials. Nevertheless, the mechanism is closely monitored and all sides continue to ensure that appropriate controls are in place for aid to reach its intended recipients. I encourage Israel and the Palestinian Authority to continue their cooperation with the United Nations and facilitate the

import of reconstruction materials that are so vital to rebuilding people's lives, while ensuring that materials are not diverted for military use.

Apart from reconstruction, Gaza's humanitarian needs run deep. More than 1.3 million of its 1.9 million people need of assistance. Continued humanitarian access and funding services to the Palestinian population in Gaza remain critical. In this dire context, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) continues to face serious financial challenges. I appeal to Member States for their generosity to ensure that UNRWA can carry out its activities effectively and in a predictable manner.

Looking at the broader situation, Gaza remains under closures and is a ticking time bomb. Instability and the risk of violent escalation are ever-present. The continued arms build-up and militant activities of Hamas and other radical groups keep both sides of the border in a state of constant alert. The continued humanitarian deprivations of Gaza's nearly 2 million residents smother dreams and ambitions, and feed instability and extremism.

The corrosive Palestinian political divide worsens the humanitarian situation and stifles development, and the absence of a Government of national unity, espousing the principles upon which to build peace, inhibits the realization of an end to the occupation and the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian State. In its July report (S/2016/595, annex), the Quartet highlighted these complex political, security and socioeconomic dynamics in Gaza as one of the negative trends severely undermining hopes for peace. Lasting progress in Gaza can be realized only on the basis of Palestinian unity, an end to the illicit arms build-up and militant activities, and a full lifting of movement and access restrictions in line with resolution 1860 (2009).

Turning to the Golan, I remain concerned by the continued breaches of the ceasefire line and by fighting in the areas of separation and limitation. These developments undermine the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement and jeopardize the ceasefire between Israel and Syria. In particular, recent fire from the Syrian Arab Armed Forces impacted the Israeli-occupied Golan. On both occasions, the Israel Defense Forces responded with an airstrike. I call on Israel and Syria to abide by the terms of the Disengagement Agreement and exercise maximum restraint.

In a matter of days, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee for the Coordination of International Assistance to Palestinians will meet here in New York. I encourage both sides to focus on positive policy shifts, consistent with the transition to greater Palestinian civil authority in Area C, contemplated by prior agreements. To this end, I welcome the parties' recent agreement on outstanding electricity debts and the creation of a new energy market, which will transfer authority to the Palestinian Government for the management of energy infrastructure. Such steps, echoing the intentions of Oslo, are critical to the viability of a future Palestinian State.

At the same time, international stakeholders must continue to work towards a negotiated end to the occupation, now entering its 50th year, and the establishment of a viable, democratic Palestine living in peace with Israel, each respecting the other's historic and religious connections to this holy land. Building on its report, the Quartet will continue its role to promote consensus to that end.

I wish to thank my Special Coordinator, Nickolay Mladenov, for his unwavering commitment and continued engagement with the parties in what remains a challenging context. For the sake of regional and indeed global peace, we must intensify our efforts to encourage the Israeli and Palestinian leadership to take the difficult steps to change the destructive trajectory currently leading us towards a one-State reality.

The President: I thank the Secretary-General for his briefing.

I shall now make a statement in my capacity as Minister for Foreign Affairs of New Zealand.

It is deeply disappointing to have to acknowledge that the comments I am about to make and that others will make today could have been made with equal force and relevance at any time in the two and a half years since negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians were suspended. We all express dismay and outrage about the violence affecting ordinary Israelis and Palestinians, and yet innocent lives continue to be lost. We all condemn settlements, and yet they continue to expand. We repeatedly encourage both sides to compromise and find a road to peace, and yet angry rhetoric and incitement prevail. The international community does what it can to support the parties in resuming negotiations, and yet despite the best efforts of a range of players we are no closer to a solution. We

all proclaim our firm commitment to the two-State solution as the only viable option, and yet the Council remains a spectator as the two-State solution erodes. There have been some positive developments, such as this week's agreement between Israel and the pauth to resolve the Palestinians' debt to the Israel Electricity Corporation, but the picture painted by the Secretary-General in his briefing should alarm us all.

New Zealand regards itself as a friend of both Israelis and Palestinians. We are not a part of that troubled region. We have no baggage or vested interests. We try hard to bring a fair and balanced perspective to this complex and difficult topic. Today we say to both parties that they are falling seriously short of the expectations of the international community and that it is time for them to step back and think again about what they need to do to keep the prospect for a negotiated two-State solution alive. And it is time that the Security Council and the international community told them so and resolve to take practical steps to help them on their way.

Recent developments with respect to Israeli settlements are of particular concern. The announcement, on 31 August, of approvals for a further 463 housing units on the West Bank, including 284 new units, is at odds with Israel's stated commitment to talk with the Palestinians and reach an agreement. So far this year, plans for 2,623 settlement units have been advanced, including the retrospective legalization of 756 units. No amount of spin can hide the fact that those actions are a violation of Israel's international obligations and that they have profoundly negative implications for the peace process.

The Palestinian side, too, has fallen short of the expectations we should all have. Violence against Israeli citizens continues to be condoned. The first local elections in a decade — a chance to mend faces and renew mandates — seem to have been postponed. Reconciliation has been placed on the back burner. And rockets from Gaza continue to target Israeli towns and cities.

The result of those developments is that the two-State solution — the vision and goal of the Security Council for nearly 50 years — is close to becoming a shattered dream. For those in Israel who think that that does not matter, who think that time is their friend, I urge them to think again. If the prospect of a two-State solution is shattered by the negative trajectory of events,

international attention will shift to the two standards of citizenship that exist in the single State that remains. No friend of Israel wishes to see such an outcome.

Therefore, today I say to colleagues on the Security Council, time is running out. It has been eight long years since the Council adopted a draft resolution on this issue. History and the international community will not judge us well. It is time for us to ask more of each of the parties, to require that they face up to their responsibilities, and to ask more of this organ, which is charged with maintaining international peace and security.

While we welcome other efforts to bring about an improvement in this negative cycle, New Zealand believes that the Quartet remains the body best placed to harness the efforts of other parties and to report to and give advice to the Council. In that respect, we note with concern yesterday's reports that Israel's Defence Minister has placed a boycott on Special Coordinator Mladenov. That action, reportedly taken in response to the Special Coordinator doing the job we have all asked him to do, is deeply counterproductive.

It was seriously disappointing that the recent report (S/2016/595, annex) of the Quartet was subject to such significant delays and that, when it arrived, its recommendations were not adopted as a basis for further Council engagement. That would have been a modest step forward, and the Council could not even agree on that. New Zealand intends to revisit these matters over the coming weeks as we try to find a way of ensuring that the Council becomes re-engaged in a matter that cries out for its attention.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I shall now give the floor to the other members of the Council.

Mr. Aboulatta (Egypt) (*spoke in Arabic*): Two days ago, on 13 September, we celebrated the twenty-third anniversary of what is known as the Oslo Accord between Palestinians and Israelis, by virtue of which it was agreed to temporarily manage Palestinian affairs for a period of no more than five years, as of 1993, provided that negotiations were conducted on final status issues on the basis of the two-State solution, by establishing a Palestinian State within the 4 July 1967 borders, with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital. The anniversary of that historic agreement should prompt

the international community, including the Security Council, to ask itself whether it has been able to help the Palestinian people to attain a modicum of their inalienable rights as enshrined in international law and Security Council and General Assembly resolutions. I would like to underscore that I am confident that our collective conscience recognizes unequivocally that the answer to that question does not require any research, or effort or scrutiny: the realities on the ground speak for themselves.

Today, 23 years after the Oslo Accord, instead of seeing a sovereign Palestinian State pursuant to international legitimacy, we see a pseudo-State of illegal settlements that contain at least half a million settlers. Those settlements have proliferated on Palestinian territories with official support from the Israeli occupation, which has spared no effort throughout decades to seize land, destroy houses and expel Palestinians, as well as with the support provided by the inability of the Organization and the silence of the Council, which had to surrender to the passiveness of the sole super-Power able to end this illegal invasion.

The principle of land-for-peace, which is internationally accepted, reflects the fact that the Palestinian question is actually about land. It shows that the settlements, the destruction of houses, the land seizures, the Judaization of Al-Quds Al-Sharif, and the separation wall are the root cause of the disease at the core of the problem, and the main obstacle to any possible negotiations to achieve the two-State solution.

Some are wrong to think that the continuing international powerlessness in the face of those illegal and inhumane practices has become something routine that could be acceptable, or that it establishes new rights other than the right of Palestinians to their land.

Allow me to reiterate that we feel great sorrow when we see attempts to exploit that powerlessness as a pretext to promote an alternative narrative concerning the Palestinian question, or to hold Palestinian people living under siege behind walls in Gaza responsible for such powerlessness, or to push for accepting the occupation and its determination and practices aimed at altering the fait accompli on the ground. That is an excuse worse than the crime.

The delay in resolving the Palestinian question because of the lack of political will on the part of the major Powers, and the ongoing policy by the occupation to pursue the illegal settlements on the ground, must

not lead us to forget the main role of the United Nations and its organs, or divert us from the path set out by international legitimacy. Perhaps it is necessary to remind everyone, in particular United Nations bodies and their representatives, that the obstacles to resolving this issue do not absolve the Organization of its responsibility and primary role as legal guarantor of the rights of the Palestinians throughout history, nor do they invalidate the relevant the Security Council and the General Assembly resolutions or the provisions of international law, without any concessions, regardless of the balance of power between the parties concerned, and without the Organization becoming a party to political arrangements that run counter the international legitimacy. Those arrangements will have no impact on the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people. And that will not change regardless of the duration of this crisis, and even if those rights have been enshrined so far in the Organization's documents and international conventions.

Despite the fact this crisis has lasted for so long, and Israel continues to turn a deaf ear to the calls of the international community, we still insist on the path to peace. That has always been made clear in the Arab Peace Initiative, which confirmed that Arab States are ready to live normally side by side in peace with Israel as neighbours, if Israel accepts the basic principles of good neighbourliness and puts an end to its occupation of Arab territories by withdrawing from the lands it occupied in 1967, including the Syrian Golan and the remaining occupied Lebanese territories in the south of that country.

As Council members can see, the equation is simple and does not consist of incitement, or hatred or even talk about legitimate resistance to occupation. It simply reflects the desire of Arab States to have normal relations with Israel, thus guaranteeing security and the legitimacy of its existence.

We are still waiting for an Israeli response to the Arab Peace Initiative, put forward years ago. We are still unable to understand why the Israeli Government is ignoring the Initiative despite the fact that it deals directly with Israel. That has been an obsession for Israel.

We also underscore that the assessments undertaken in an attempt to distort the Initiative are erroneous and false. The Arab peoples are too aware to accept any concessions on the rights of the Palestinian people,

or the rights of the Syrian and Lebanese peoples, to recover their occupied territories.

Egypt remains committed to the Arab Peace Initiative and continues to encourage international parties to relaunch negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis, including the efforts of France, Russia and United Nations Special Coordinator Nickolay Mladenov.

Egypt will remain determined to work in multilateral and bilateral formats to execute its vision for peace in the region — a vision that was launched 37 years ago when Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty. It can still be implemented, with the necessary political will and if Israel finally decides to opt for comprehensive and just peace, for itself and for the States in the region.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to start by thanking the Secretary-General for his presence here today, for his commitment and for his briefing. We would also like to pay tribute to the United Nations and the Special Coordinator, Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, for their work on the ground. I take this opportunity to reiterate France's full support for Mr. Mladenov.

We find ourselves, on the eve of the beginning of the ministerial segment seventy-first session of the General Assembly, at a moment where it is appropriate to take stock. The results of the past year have been indisputable. What we are seeing here is the inexorable marginalization of two-State solution, which is a solution, let us be clear, that is today at risk. Israeli settlement policy constitutes one of the main threats to the implementation of a two-State solution. By splintering Palestine's future territory, the settlement policy undermines the prospects for a Palestinian State. The settlement policy is demonstrated by the de facto annexation of Area C, the transfer of populations, impediments to movement, and the destruction of housing and humanitarian infrastructure for Palestinians. The radicalization of public opinion, acts of violence, incitements to violence and terrorism seriously undermine the prospects for seeing two States coexist — a State of Israel and a Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security. Progress in terms of Palestinian reconciliation are also indispensable and urgent.

Following two years of interruption of the negotiations process, France vigorously advocates for the need for renewed international assistance for

the peace process and the preservation of a two-State solution. We must act collectively to place this conflict at the very core of our priorities and extricate ourselves from the current impasse, which is an impasse that weakens the Palestinian Authority, jeopardizes security for Israelis and fuels the radicalization of public opinion throughout the region and beyond.

It is in that context that France has presented to the parties and their main partners an initiative aimed at recreating collective political mobilization in favour of the peace process. Our approach is both progressive and collective. It is progressive because all of us know that the conditions for the immediate relaunch of the negotiations are simply not in place today. It is therefore the responsibility of the international community to urge the parties to return to the negotiating table by creating around them a conducive climate coupled with a positive agenda, with a set of incentives to that end. This is the very heart of our initiative. It is a collective approach because we are attempting to tailor each stage of our initiative to existing efforts, in particular those of the Quartet and our Arab partners. Furthermore, France has always yearned to see the Security Council, when the time is right, play a key role in assisting and consolidating the negotiations process.

The ministerial conference that was held in Paris on 3 June was a decisive moment that enabled us to take a first step. The international community reaffirmed its commitment to the two-State solution and expressed its determination to engage collectively to recreate the necessary conditions for the resumption of peace negotiations. On 19 September, in New York, at the margins of the General Assembly, France will organize a working meeting at the level of high officials to take stock of work already carried out and to identify measures that should enable us to preserve the two-State solution and make progress on the conditions necessary for a resumption of the peace process. It goes without saying that we will continue to involve the parties and inform them of our work in the most transparent manner, as we have always done at all stages of the process.

If we do not act with resolve, the two-State solution will die, and it will gradually make way for a situation of fait accompli, which will never guarantee a just and lasting settlement of the conflict; rather, it will continue to weigh upon the region's equilibrium. France will therefore spare no effort to prevent this drift and

will work to recreate a political momentum based on the two-State solution.

We will never give up. Together with all of our partners, we will continue to work unstintingly to this end.

Mr. Bermúdez (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): I too wish to convey my thanks to the Secretary-General for his briefing. We are grateful to the presidency of New Zealand and to you, Foreign Minister Murray McCulley, for convening today's meeting and for your presence at the Security Council today.

Uruguay is concerned at the lack of progress in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its humanitarian, political and security consequences in both countries and the entire region. Unfortunately, in the past few months we have had no significant news with respect to the peace process. We were hoping to see a quicker pace and a greater impact following the Quartet report (S/2016/595, annex) but that has not been the case. So far, the parties have not taken any measure to reverse the trends that are threatening the two-State solution despite the helpful recommendations set out in the report.

Despite the fact that there seems to have been a gradual reduction in terrorist acts and the general level of violence, the political climate has not really changed, and we still see a paralysis when it comes to the possible renewal of direct bilateral negotiations. In Uruguay's opinion, as the Quartet's report rightly pointed out, Israel's continuing construction of settlements is a serious threat to peace. The fact that only a few days after the publication of the report, Israel announced its decision to build 560 new houses in the West Bank and 240 in East Jerusalem, without considering the report's recommendations, is a very bad sign however we look at it.

We reiterate our concern about the protracted stalemate in the peace process between Israel and Palestine. Political signals should be sent so as to break the vicious circle of misunderstanding and violent clashes that undermine the Palestinian people's aspirations to finally live in peace after half a century of occupation and a serious humanitarian situation, particularly in Gaza, which has worsened after every armed escalation. We hope that both countries can overcome their differences and reach an understanding on the key issues that divide them. Today, almost 23 years after the Oslo Accords, at which both countries

recognized each other and laid the groundwork for working towards a solution based on two independent States, we were sorry to see that the Quartet indicates a situation of continuing violence, attacks on civilians, incitements to violence and weakening trust, none of which is conducive to achieving a peaceful solution to the conflict.

The importance of taking urgent measures to reverse the current stalemate in the conflict compels us to reiterate our call to the parties to resume their contact on a basis capable of meeting the desires of both sides. That means dealing with terrorism in the Palestinian territories, ending Israel's illegal settlement of those territories, silencing incitement to violence through hate speech and striving for a genuine commitment to achieving a two-State solution through appropriate policies, such as the Quartet recommends in its latest report.

I should reiterate that seeking solutions to issues related to international peace and security is a priority for Uruguay, and we will work unceasingly to try to bring the parties together to that end. We do not ignore the continuing serious problems, but we refuse to give up hope and would like to remind everyone that more complex situations have been resolved when the requisite political will could be found, such as occurred with the Camp David accords and the Sinai agreement between Egypt and Israel. Similarly, in 1994, the State of Israel and the Kingdom of Jordan were able to arrive at a peace acceptable to both parties.

While Uruguay believes that the achievement of a lasting solution is up to the two parties to the conflict, the international community also plays a significant role in it, particularly since up to now the parties have been unable to reach an agreement on their own. It is therefore important that the international community step up its efforts to support the process and encourage the parties to resume a dialogue and sit down once again at the negotiating table, with a view to coming up with a peaceful, just, negotiated and lasting solution in accordance with international law. In that regard, we emphasize the importance of ensuring that the parties come up with a specific timetable and measures that each of them has to take in areas where the path to a solution has been blocked, such as combating terrorism, demonstrating unity within the Palestinian Government and agreeing on a process for removing the illegal settlements.

Uruguay is ready to support and collaborate on any proposal that can bring both parties back to the negotiating table and make progress with the peace process. In that regard, we commend the Arab Peace Initiative, the French initiative and any others that may emerge. Lastly, I would like to conclude by saying that, sadly, almost 70 years since the process began, and despite massive efforts, we still see no closure. The international community continues to call for a negotiated political agreement, the only way out of this endless tunnel of death and destruction. I urge the parties to listen to those calls and allow us to help them. We must not forget that the most important part of coexistence among States is peace; nor should we allow generations of young people and children to continue to grow up in mistrust, fear and hatred.

Mr. Churkin (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank the Secretary-General for his substantive statement. Despite some reduction in tensions on the ground, the Palestinian-Israeli situation remains problematic. Various incidents in the West Bank and Jerusalem, as well as the sporadic aggravation of tensions around the Gaza Strip show that the risk of an escalation in the conflict is as high as ever.

Against the background of a stalemated settlement, new initiatives aimed at finding ways to reignite the peace process are appearing. Those ideas seem reasonable and are at least aimed at achieving some genuinely essential goals. Nonetheless, in our view they should only complement the efforts being made within the framework of the established mechanism of the Middle East Quartet. Attempts to shift focus to other forums will merely divert the international community's attention from the Palestinian question. We concur with those calling for a more active involvement in the issue on the part of the Security Council, and maybe they should take a more vigorous approach to promote that idea.

On 22 September, on the margins of the general debate in the General Assembly at its seventy-first session, we will hold a ministerial meeting of the Quartet. I would once again like to draw attention to the recommendations in the report (S/2016/595, annex) of the Quartet published on 1 June. We firmly believe that if we can move forward on them we could create the conditions for reviving Palestinian-Israeli relations and a relaunch of the political process on the basis of internationally recognized agreements. In that context,

we would like to emphasize the crucial significance of the Arab Peace Initiative.

The lack of unity among Palestinians is another obstacle to reviving the political process. All those who wield influence on the Palestinian side should urge them to unite without delay on the basis of the Palestinian Liberation Organization's platform and the principles of the Quartet.

The humanitarian and economic situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, especially the Gaza Strip, continues to be a serious concern. It exacerbates dissatisfaction among the population, helps to radicalize social attitudes and makes it harder to reach a negotiated solution. The violence, and the incitements to violence, must be stopped and the settlement activity must end. We believe that a durable peace, based on a two-State solution, can meet the aspirations of the Palestinians to an independent sovereign State as well as Israelis' desire for security. And it will help to normalize conditions in the region as a whole.

For our part, we pursue our efforts to overcome the negative trends in the Palestinian-Israeli situation and to channel it towards a political and diplomatic solution. We are working actively and directly with the parties to the conflict and the concerned States in the region. In our contacts in the past few weeks with President Abbas of Palestine and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel, they underlined their interest in meeting in Moscow in order to discuss the best ways to unblock the peace process without preconditions. Our activity is based on the international efforts to arrive at a reliable negotiating process between the Palestinian and Israeli sides. Needless to say, those efforts will be conducted further in close coordination with the Quartet partners and key international and regional actors.

In conclusion, I would like to affirm our support for the work of Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process.

Mr. Ibrahim (Malaysia): On behalf of my delegation, I warmly welcome you, Sir, to the Security Council and thank you for presiding over this meeting. Malaysia appreciates New Zealand's tireless efforts to propel the Council to take urgent action on the Palestinian question. We share your view, Sir, on the crucial role of the Council in creating the necessary conditions for peace and pushing the parties to restart the dialogue process in order to salvage the two-State solution. My

delegation is also grateful to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for his presence and briefing today.

My delegation decided to take the floor today in view of the worsening situation in the occupied Palestinian territory and the ongoing apathy in the Council to address the situation. In particular, we wish to highlight the expansion of settlement activities, which constitutes the biggest threat to peace and the two-State solution.

Over the years, we have heard repeated warnings from the Secretary-General and his Special Coordinator, Mr. Mladenov, about the expansion of settlement activities, which threatens to bury the two-State solution. Over the past few months alone, hundreds of Israeli settlements have continued to expand despite their undeniably illegal nature under international law, clear recommendations of the Quartet report (S/2016/595, annex) and widespread condemnations on the part of the international community. In addition, we also see attempts by the Israeli authorities to retroactively legalize outposts in another systematic attempt to change the realities on the ground.

For far too long, such activities have persisted with impunity as we continue to restrain our response to mere verbal disapproval without any effective measures to halt the illegal activities. The expansion of settlement activities and the legalization of outposts are accompanied by increasing demolitions of Palestinian homes and structures, the confiscation of Palestinian lands and increasing settler violence. In 2015, on average, four cases of settler violence against Palestinian civilians were reported per week. In one recent incident, Israeli settlers unleashed dogs to attack a Palestinian man, while, in another, Israeli settlers pumped sewage onto land belonging to Palestinian farmers, consequently damaging Palestinian-owned trees. Even young Palestinian girls have not been spared from settlers' violence, as they have been harassed and beaten by Israeli settlers. In most cases, there is no recourse to justice.

In the case of one Palestinian family, which owns olive orchards and agricultural lands in the occupied West Bank, the members were prevented from working their land located in close proximity to an illegal Israeli settlement. Their trees and land were damaged and poisoned by the settlers. Despite complaints submitted to the Israel police 86 times, no action has been taken to hold the settlers to account or provide redress. Settler

violence can no longer be treated as isolated incidents. It is clear that the settlers are becoming emboldened as a direct result of the Israeli Government's policy on settlement expansion and the impunity allowed them.

Settlement expansion occurs against a backdrop of severe restrictions on the national growth and development of Palestinian communities. We are all aware of the near-impossible prospect of obtaining permits from Israeli authorities to enable Palestinian families to expand their homes to accommodate the natural growth in Area C of the occupied West Bank. Many Palestinians have had to resort to building homes without permits, only later to face Israeli demolition orders and costly fines. Unable to pay the unjust fines, which could amount to tens of thousands of dollars, many have been forced to demolish their homes. We saw one such case just last week. As a Palestinian who had to destroy his home in East Jerusalem stated,

"The first hammer blow feels like you are hitting yourself. It is not easy to demolish your dream".

In another incident, a Palestinian father had to demolish a room for his three small children to avoid exorbitant demolition fines issued by the Israeli municipality after spending 12 years in a failed attempt to fight the demolition order in Israeli court.

Such examples are part of a brutal and systematic attempt by Israel to break the spirit of the Palestinians and make their lives in occupied East Jerusalem unbearable, so that they will eventually leave. We agree with the Secretary-General that it is disturbing that any opposition to Israeli settlement expansion to protect the legitimate rights of Palestinians is now labelled by the Israeli leadership as ethnic cleansing. That is truly provocative, senseless and reflects nothing more than a feeble attempt to defend the indefensible — an incorrigible attitude to stay the destructive course of harvesting Palestinian despair and misery.

Clearly, doing nothing is not an option for the Security Council as the organ entrusted to maintain international peace and security. We must take urgent, effective actions to halt and reverse illegal settlement activities, which are fuelling radicalization owing to widespread frustrations and anger among occupied Palestinians. We must discourage Israel from wallowing in their repressive policies. We must not allow our plea to fall deaf ears. We must have the courage to nurse our bleeding conscience.

To maintain international attention on this issue, Malaysia, together with like-minded members of the Council, is planning to hold an Arria Formula meeting in October with a focus on the issue of settlements. Malaysia also welcomes the upcoming meeting of the Quartet in New York as a follow-up to the international ministerial conference held in Paris in June. We continue to support the French initiative, which complements the efforts of the Middle East Quartet. We look forward to concrete actions being taken by the relevant parties, backed by the international community, to recreate the much-needed political horizon for a two-State solution.

In conclusion, I reiterate Malaysia's call for the Council to use the various tools at its disposal to create the necessary conditions for peace and to influence the parties' behaviour in order to salvage the two-State solution. We stand ready to engage constructively with other Council members in that regard.

Mr. Gimolieca (Angola): We thank you, Sir, for presiding over this important meeting and for your very insightful remarks on such a troubling and sensitive issue. We also thank Secretary-General Ban-Ki-moon for his briefing and his continued commitment to a just resolution of this intractable conflict, which has been a source of frustration and despair for so many of us.

As we reach the final months of our tenure in the Security Council, it is with great regret that we note the lack of progress towards a two-State solution and the lack of unity within the Council on how to reverse the negative trends on the ground. Despite the efforts of a large majority to provide the guidance and support that Israel and Palestinians need to move towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict and a negotiated two-State solution, which envisages the coexistence of Palestine and Israel living side-by-side in peace and security, key stakeholders remain reluctant to put their weight behind those efforts.

The reluctance to enforce the decisions that have been adopted, along with the unwillingness to enforce basic respect for human rights and international humanitarian law, has not only delayed any meaningful progress but also demonstrated the importance of mechanisms such as the Middle East Quartet, whose recommendations remain largely ignored by the Government of Israel. Since the latest Quartet report (S/2016/595, annex), which offers recommendations for the way forward in the peace process, the Israeli Government has increased settlement-related activities

as well as demolitions of Palestinian homes and civilian infrastructure, and demonstrated a total disregard for any international initiative to bring the parties together to negotiate a just and final settlement to the conflict.

That is not only regrettable, but also unacceptable. It has been nearly 40 years since the Security Council determined that Israeli settlements in occupied territory had no legal validity and were an obstruction to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East. Yet here we are today standing by and allowing thousands of units to be built in East Jerusalem and the West Bank by the Israeli Government with total impunity and disregard for our calls to reverse this trend.

As we have repeatedly stated, this deadly and destructive conflict has global repercussions, and time is running out for us to bring about a meaningful solution. That is why it is extremely important for us to present a united front and to support all multilateral efforts to create a viable political horizon so as to resolve this conflict once and for all.

As we seek to promote justice, respect for human rights, international humanitarian law and all other democratic principles around the world, we must not compromise our credibility by ignoring the plight of the Palestinian people. The members of the Security Council, the Middle East Quartet and all other stakeholders have a moral obligation to bring about an end to this illegal occupation, which has lasted nearly 50 years. It is our hope that Israel will recognize the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination and independence by ceasing all illegal settlement activity, as well as all oppressive policies, and participate constructively in all multilateral efforts to revive negotiations, because that is the only true path to lasting peace.

Mr. Bessho (Japan): Let me first express my gratitude to His Excellency Mr. Murray McCully, Foreign Minister of New Zealand, for having conveyed this meeting. My gratitude also goes to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for his presence here and his thorough briefing today.

As the Secretary-General mentioned in his briefing, a variety of initiatives have been undertaken in pursuit of the two-State solution. Unfortunately, we have seen little progress. Japan expresses its strong concern over the continued violence towards civilians, terrorist attacks and incitements to violence. We also express

strong concern over the continuing policy of settlement expansion. We believe that settlement activity is a violation of international law and steadily erodes the viability of the two-State solution.

In addition, the continued violence is fundamentally incompatible with a peaceful solution. The international community must take action to address the dire humanitarian situation and recovery needs of the people of Gaza and to encourage the resumption of meaningful negotiations.

Given the difficulty of the current situation on the ground, creating an environment conducive to a two-State solution may seem like a roundabout approach. However, I would like to make note of the fifth ministerial-level meeting of the Four-Party Consultative Unit for the Corridor for Peace and Security initiative, which was held in Jericho, West Bank, on 7 September. It was hosted by Japan, with ministerial-level participation on the part of Israel, Jordan and Palestine. Through job creation, this initiative seeks to support a sustainable economy in Palestine, which underpins the viability of a two-State solution. At first glance, this project to create a conducive environment may not seem like a short route to a two-State solution. However, the cooperation of the four parties through this initiative has lasted for 10 years, regardless of the highs and lows of the political situation, and it plays a meaningful role in rebuilding trust between the two parties through economic and social development. Japan continues to be committed to peace and prosperity in the region.

I would like to briefly discuss the situation in Syria as well. Japan welcomes the agreement reached on 9 September between Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov, which has resulted in a nationwide cessation of hostilities since 12 September. Even more importantly, the degree of violence has decreased markedly since the conclusion of this agreement. The reduction in violence allows for the expansion of humanitarian access, gives hope to Syria's people and increases the prospect of the resumption of the political process.

Let us recall that the cessation of hostilities, confirmed by resolution 2268 (2016) in February, was observed fairly faithfully for two months. In the following months, however, we witnessed a string of breathtakingly tragic events. We must prevent a relapse. Japan is committed to playing its role as a member of

the Council and the International Syria Support Group to promote the stability and recovery of Syria.

Mr. Ciss (Senegal) (spoke in French): Mr. President, I should like to start by commending your initiative of holding this meeting, which provides us with an opportunity to once again exchange views on the situation in the Middle East, including the question of Palestine. I wish to convey my gratitude to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for his comprehensive briefing, which clearly underscored the links between the impasse in the political process, the unacceptable continuation of the settlement policy and related activities, and the very difficult humanitarian situation, especially in Gaza.

Less than a month after our last meeting on the issue (see S/PV.7757), we are gathered here yet again to discuss the very difficult situation prevailing in the occupied Palestinian territories. We note that, unfortunately, the settlement policy and related activities are continuing and intensifying, rendering increasingly uncertain the prospects for a two-State solution.

According to the United Nations, in the month of August 2016 alone, Israeli security services either destroyed or confiscated 85 civilian structures throughout 28 communities in the West Bank. In total, more than 786 housing units and structures have been destroyed in the West Bank in 2016 alone, leading to the displacement of 1,197 people, including 558 children. More than 200 of the structures destroyed had been used for humanitarian purposes.

Then we have the destruction of the water-supply system, which was built with UNICEF in the Jordan River Valley, which impacts about 1,000 Palestinians throughout five Bedouin communities that have particularly erratic access to water, especially in summer. In addition, communities including Daqqa, Khan Al-Ahmar, Umm Al-Khair, Abu Nuwar and Susya, to list but a few, host very vulnerable Palestinian communities, where families, which consist mainly of displaced persons, live in constant fear of finding themselves shelterless from one day to the next.

That is why my delegation denounces once again the continuing and increasing demolition and confiscation of Palestinian houses and structures, and urges the Israeli Government to put an end to the forced transfer of populations and to the physical and administrative restrictions they have imposed, which exacerbate tensions between the two communities.

Palestinian children continue to pay a very heavy price in this conflict. Thousands have lost their lives, including 535 during the military assault on the Gaza Strip in 2014. Their suffering is compounded by administrative detention, the disproportionate use of force and extrajudicial assassinations that, in addition to constituting violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, do nothing but stoke hatred and violence. I express my delegation's deep concerns over the critical situation of three young Palestinians: the brothers Muhammad and Mahmoud Balboul — a dentist and army officer, respectively — and the journalism student Malik Al-Qadi, who has been on hunger strike for almost two months.

The catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza — a small enclave of some 36,000 square kilometres that has been besieged for over nine years, and where 1.3 million of its 2 million inhabitants require assistance — should weigh on our collective conscience. Following the conflict two years ago, three-quarters of Gaza's homes are in need of repair as a result of the failure to honour commitments amounting to \$3.5 billion undertaken in the framework of the Cairo donors conference of 2014. I therefore take this opportunity to welcome the activities of humanitarian players, including United Nations agencies, to mitigate the daily impact of the conflict on children by enhancing their psychosocial well-being, improving the supply of such basic services as water, rebuilding schools and catching up on the education of students who have fallen behind. Given these circumstances, my delegation reiterates its call for international protection for the Palestinian people, who have been under occupation for nearly 50 years, and reaffirms its support for the initiative to make 2017 the year that marks the end of the occupation.

Extreme poverty, a high level of unemployment and the total lack of development prospects are scourges that could promote the emergence of a new conflict. The Quartet has drawn attention to that danger in its report (S/2016/595, annex), which reveals that only 5 per cent of Gaza's water is potable and that access to electricity is scarce. In that regard, the report of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development is unambiguous. It tells us that the rate of growth of the Palestinian economy could easily double if there were no occupation, leading to a virtuous cycle of reduced unemployment and poverty and offering the Palestinian people conditions conducive to a better social and economic life. We therefore echo the Quartet's appeal

to the Israeli Government to implement previous agreements and transfer competencies to the Palestinian Authority, especially in Area C, so as to promote long-awaited progress in housing, access to water and energy, communications, agriculture and natural resources.

As the occupying Power, and in compliance with its commitment to the two-State solution, Israel will have to end all settlement and related activities and launch sincere negotiations according to a pre-established time table with explicit goals, leading to a lasting peace that meets both its own security needs and the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people to a sovereign State on the basis of the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

I cannot conclude my statement without voicing our hope that, despite the delays, local elections will be held throughout the Palestinian territories and open the way to reconciliation among the political stakeholders, leading to the formation of a Government of national unity on the basis of the Cairo agreement. We reaffirm our conviction that influential countries of the region and the Security Council have a crucial role to play in the optimal management of the peace process. Similarly, we reiterate our support for the Paris conference as a contribution to the solution to the conflict based on existing platforms, such as the Arab Peace Initiative, leading to the establishment of two States of Israel and Palestine within the pre-1967 borders.

Ms. Power (United States of America): I thank Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for his briefing and Foreign Minister McCully for presiding over this meeting.

Allow me also, on behalf of the United States, to wish former Israeli President Shimon Peres a speedy recovery. I last had the chance to meet President Peres at his office in Israel in February, and greatly admire his ongoing work to promote peace and closer ties between Israelis and Palestinians.

The United States shares the Secretary-General's views about rising tensions on ground, and we continue to condemn all terrorist attacks. All sides must exercise restraint and refrain from provocative actions and rhetoric. In the Golan Heights, we are alarmed by the increasing number of rockets and shells fired from Syria, as well as rockets launched from Gaza. In addition, there have been recent reports of incitement on social media, including on accounts allegedly linked to Fatah.

We are also deeply concerned about allegations of the use of excessive force by Israeli security forces against Palestinian civilians. This includes the killing and wounding of two Palestinian men inside their car in the Shuafat refugee camp near East Jerusalem on 5 September. The Israeli Ministry of Justice has opened an investigation, and we look forward to seeing the full results. At the same time, we remain deeply concerned about attacks on the Israel Defense Forces, including the stabbing of an Israeli soldier near Jenin on 24 August.

The international community can make a tangible investment in that region's stability. Both reconstruction efforts in Gaza and programmes run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) are facing critical funding shortfalls. For Gaza, out of \$3.5 billion pledged for reconstruction at the 2014 Cairo conference, just \$1.6 billion have been disbursed so far.

Even with limited funding, there has been some progress. Fifty per cent of damaged homes have been repaired and more than 30 per cent of fully destroyed homes have been rebuilt. But Gaza needs more support. For an economy with 41 per cent unemployment, further disbursements of aid to Gaza will have a significant impact. The UNRWA financial shortfall of \$74 million could leave more than 500,000 students out of school and 30,000 employees without paychecks next month. A suspension of UNRWA core services could further destabilize an already volatile region. The United States has contributed an additional \$12 million to fund UNRWA, bringing our total this year to nearly \$329 million. Sweden and Switzerland have also stepped up with new contributions and pledges. We urge other Governments to join this effort to avert a potential humanitarian crisis, which would have long-term effects.

The United States strongly opposes continued Israeli settlement activity, which is corrosive to the cause of peace. As we have said repeatedly, such actions are not consistent with Israel's stated desire to achieve a two-State solution. We share the deep concern expressed by the Secretary-General and other Council members about reports in July that the Israeli Government published tenders for hundreds of settlement units in East Jerusalem and advanced other settlement plans. We also share concerns regarding the Israeli Government's attempts to retroactively legalize outposts that are illegal under Israeli law. Most recently, Ministry of Justice officials questioned the 1 September order from

the High Court of Justice to demolish 17 houses in the Netiv Ha'avot settlement outpost within 18 months. The Court determined that these settlements were built on private Palestinian lands. There are also reports that the Israeli Government has begun the process to take over or lease land privately owned by Palestinians so as to relocate the illegal Amona outpost, as well as to consider building homes for Israeli settlers in a military compound in Hebron.

These cases represent unprecedented and troubling steps that are inconsistent with prior Israeli legal opinions. The cases also run counter to longstanding Israeli official policy not to seize privately owned land or use land originally seized for military purposes for settlements. The situation in Susiya, which remains under threat of demolition, is also troubling. If the Israeli Government proceeds with demolitions, it would have a very damaging impact on the lives of the area's Palestinian inhabitants, who were already displaced on other, previous occasions.

Those actions appear to be the latest examples of a steady acceleration of settlement activity and demolitions, which is systematically undermining prospects for a two-State solution. Those concerns were addressed specifically in the Quartet report (S/2016/595, annex), and have been raised repeatedly by the other Quartet members and the international community. We call on the parties to take significant steps urgently to stabilize the situation and to reverse current trends. We will continue to urge both sides to demonstrate, through policies and actions, a genuine commitment to preserving prospects for the two-State solution. As a member of the Quartet, the United States co-authored the Quartet report, and we stand behind its recommendations in their entirety. Furthermore, we support the efforts of Special Coordinator Mladenov and his team, who continue to work tirelessly to promote peace and to keep us apprised of developments on issues that reflect the concerns of all members of the Security Council.

Turning to Syria, as all members are aware, after months of negotiations, the United States and Russia reached an agreement on a series of steps aimed at reducing the violence and alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people. The goal is also to create an environment conducive to negotiations on a political transition for Syria, which is the only way to end this horrific conflict. That agreement is not one based on trust and promises. It is an agreement based on

reciprocal actions, halting attacks and allowing for deliveries of assistance. We therefore look to Russia to deliver on its commitment to use its leverage to stop the Al-Assad regime from employing the barbaric tactics it has long used in the conflict. That means a halt to the barrel bombs, a halt to the chemical-weapon attacks, a halt to indiscriminate assaults on civilian areas and a halt to the starve-get-bombed-or-surrender tactics that have characterized the Al-Assad regime's approach to conflict.

The plan starts with a nationwide cessation of hostilities that excludes Jabhat Al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). We urge all parties, regime and opposition, to adhere to the cessation of hostilities by stopping aerial bombardments and stopping attempts to take new territory. So far, early reports indicate that violence has decreased significantly, which is encouraging. But violence has not completely stopped. Progress towards a political solution will depend upon all parties adhering to the cessation of hostilities and all relevant Governments using their influence to promote sustained calm.

I want to stress that the cessation of hostilities is only one part of the agreement. Humanitarian assistance also needs to flow. That ought to be straightforward, but the Al-Assad regime has employed every possible tactic to disrupt aid deliveries. Those include the regime removing medical supplies from convoys and withholding approvals for the United Nations to reach certain areas. As we all know, the consequences are direct and immediate. Blocking aid kills people. Those tactics have to stop. United Nations convoys have to be able to reach the nearly 600,000 Syrians living in besieged areas, where people are almost entirely dependent upon aid deliveries to survive — not in a few weeks or months. The convoys need to roll today. That means Damascus must grant swift, final approvals and provide facilitation letters for assistance to reach all besieged and hard-to-reach locations. It also means that the opposition must provide assurances that assistance will not be impeded in the areas that it controls.

Only after we have seen improved humanitarian access and a sustained period of reduced violence will the United States and Russia take steps to establish a joint centre to facilitate the targeting of Jabhat Al-Nusra, Al-Qaida's affiliate in Syria, and ISIL. Those are terrorist groups that pose a direct threat to our collective security and whose toxic ideologies are incompatible with the moderate opposition and

the aspirations of the Syrian people. Any party to the conflict that seeks to maintain its legitimacy should distance itself in every way possible from terrorist organizations. Targeting Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIL, however, cannot be a pretext for the Al-Assad regime's indiscriminate attacks and siege tactics, which only increase the suffering of innocents and generates new recruits for these violent extremist groups.

That is why the United States insisted in our negotiation with Russia that two things had to happen in parallel if we are to achieve our goals. We all must intensify our actions against terrorists, and Russia must ensure that Al-Assad's forces are no longer in bombing in any opposition or Al-Nusra areas — meaning that the regime would no longer be able to use the excuse that it is targeting Al-Nusra in order to go after its own people. To stress: if and when the joint centre is stood up and sets into motion action against terrorist targets, Al-Assad's military aircraft must simultaneously stop flying any combat missions over eastern Aleppo, the Damascus suburbs, Latakia, Idlib, Dar'a and any other areas where opposition forces or Jabhat Al-Nusra are present. It is noteworthy and important that Russia agreed to that, as well as to the role of the joint centre in monitoring the Syrian regime's compliance. That contributed significantly to our pursuit of the deal.

Yet we are clear-eyed about the many challenges still to be tackled before we can reach that phase of the deal. And many new challenges will arise to implement it successfully, given the regime's track record of breaking its commitments and flouting its obligations, including obligations determined by the Security Council. If all parties live up to their obligations, we have a chance — a chance to make progress towards a political solution.

A civil defence volunteer in eastern Aleppo, Mohammed Omar, told a reporter that, for the first time in far too long,

"people are going about their business and children are even playing in the street".

Children playing outside should not be an aberration, should not be worthy of comment in the Council. All of us must do everything possible to ensure that this relative calm can be sustained.

Mr. Arcia Vivas (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank the New Zealand presidency for the convening of today's meeting today, and we thank

Foreign Minister Murray McCully for presiding over it. New Zealand's effective leadership of the Security Council and its willingness to address the initiatives and proposals made in this organ are recognized and welcomed by our delegation. We also welcome the briefing by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, which is a clear illustration of his interest and the importance he attaches to the issue, as well as of his commitment so that the United Nations, with the support of the United Nations, can help find peace and stability in the region.

We reiterate our support for Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov.

The situation in the Middle East continues to give rise to concerns, given the various pressing, diverse and complicated situations in that tumultuous part of the world. In that regard, we will focus our statement on the Palestinian question, which is at the heart, or has significant impact on, the recent problems and the tensions in the region.

We continue to see, with disappointment and indignation, how the intransigent attitude and heinous practices of the Israeli occupying Power against the Palestinian people in the occupied territories and against others who suffer from the unjust blockade of the Gaza Strip. We are deeply concerned at seeing how the two-State solution — the most appropriate and broadly recognized to ensure the existence of a free and sovereign Palestinian State living in peace alongside Israel — appears to be fading further away each day with the actions of the occupying Power against international law, respect for peoples and the very norms of coexistence and understanding between communities and peoples.

The lives of Palestinians are being threatened by the illegal, provocative and violent acts committed by Israeli authorities and settlers against a defenceless population. Palestinian living conditions have deteriorated significantly as a result of this reprehensible occupation, leading to a critical humanitarian situation. The geographic continuity, the political and administrative divisions, the demographic composition, historical rights and the cultural and religious fabric of Palestinian communities and land in the West Bank and East Jerusalem have been significantly altered in favour of the occupying Power, thereby imperilling the viability of an independent Palestinian State.

All of us are aware that one of the main impediments to dialogue and peace between Israelis and Palestinians,

as well as one of the greatest threats to the two-State solution and the very existence of Palestine, is the immoral settlement policy of the Israeli occupying Power, which, arbitrarily and with full impunity, has moved forward with establishing and expanding settlements on Palestinian territory, using force or legal and administrative subterfuge to take land from the Palestinians and destroy their homes, infrastructure and property to set up hundreds of illegal settlements, mostly inhabited by extremist Israeli settlers, who add to the tragedy of the confiscation of property that legitimately belongs to Palestinians the worry rooted in the acts of harassment, assault and violence against displaced Palestinians, who stand up and fight back in dignity to assert their right over their land.

Some 684 housing units have been demolished in the West Bank in 2016, and so far this year we have seen a 25 per cent increase in demolitions of Palestinian homes. Some of the demolitions have been punitive, others have been due to the lack of building permits. Sometimes they have been done in order for illegal settlements to be built, in violation of international humanitarian law and the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention. This represents a break with the two-State solution concept and remorselessly affects the viability of a free Palestine and its existence as an equal State among the other nations of the Middle East.

In this atmosphere of tension and injustice, Palestinians are living under the surveillance and harassment of the Israeli military and security forces which impedes the free movement of Palestinians. Still worse, we are seeing adult men and women and young Palestinians falling victim to indiscriminate and disproportionate violence at the hands of the occupying Power's military and security forces and hotheaded settlers. They have been killed, injured, indefinitely detained and imprisoned. They are the victims of collective punishment due to real or alleged attacks that could have been perpetrated by a single Palestinian or a group of Palestinians against an Israeli or a group of Israelis, which are acts that we have the obligation to reject and condemn.

Entire Palestinian towns and communities are at the mercy of the indiscriminate and criminal repression of the occupying Power, whose actions have led to the death of 218 Palestinians since October 2015. More than 17,000 Palestinians have been wounded by live ammunition — rubber bullets — or felled by tear gas. In addition, more than 7,000 Palestinians, including more

than 500 minors, are languishing in Israeli prisons, and more than 700 people are being held in administrative detention. The harassment, violence and oppression exercised against the Palestinian people are part of the Israeli strategy to deprive them of their ancestral lands and bring about the end of the idea of having their own State. We therefore reject this erroneous and prejudicial approach by Israel in its way of addressing the question of Palestine.

We must draw attention to the critical humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territories as a result of the Israeli occupation. The vast majority of Palestinian communities in Area C of the West Bank are facing serious difficulties in gaining access to distribution networks of drinking water, due to the lack or destruction of that infrastructure or because the Israeli authorities or the water companies themselves have decided to restrict the pumping of water. Access to the education for Palestinian children and young people is affected by Israeli action, including the detention of minors, military operations, incidents with settlers, restrictions on school construction, and restrictions on movement occasioned by the checkpoints.

It has been extremely difficult for Palestinians health systems in the West Bank to meet the needs of the population because of the occupation, restricted access and the lack of medical equipment. The Palestinians subjected to the unjust and brutal blockade of the Gaza Strip are in a similar or worse humanitarian situation. Nearly 2 million have seen their homes destroyed, with little or no possibility of their being rebuilt, which is also the case with hospitals, schools, workplaces, property or service facilities. Beyond the closure of border-crossing points and severe limitations on entry and exit to and from the Gaza Strip, there is the terrible legacy of explosive remnants of war, which continue to pose a threat to civilians, as does shelling from the Israeli side, motivated or not by attacks from some quarters in Gaza, resulting in the people of Gaza being subject to collective and undeserved punishment. We welcome the progress made by the Gaza reconstruction mechanism, but this progress should not make us forget that the reason for the dire situation remains the blockade.

We call on the United Nations to extend and step up efforts to address this situation and support the Palestinian people during this humanitarian crisis. In addition to the direct action and the contribution of United Nations agencies, it is appropriate and necessary

for the Security Council to continuously monitor the humanitarian issue in the occupied territories and the Gaza Strip, which is just as important as the Council's dedication to the political negotiations aspects it focuses on. We would encourage Council members of the Council to ensure that humanitarian aspects are included in its discussions in order to safeguard the welfare of the Palestinians.

Given this bleak picture, the call for the occupying Power to cease its aggressive, destructive and colonial policies and bring to justice those responsible for massacres and undignified acts against Palestinians is all the more necessary. We call for an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and an end to the blockade of the Gaza Strip. In all the decades of their occupation of Palestinian territories, the Israelis have done nothing but promote inequality, injustice and impunity, which is a breeding ground for despair and the rebellion of the Palestinians against the unjust situation in which they find themselves.

The Security Council must cease its inaction, stand firm in defence of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, make concrete efforts to bring the parties to the negotiating table and decisively support a political approach that will lead to a dialogue and negotiation. From our critical position against the intransigence and abusiveness of the occupying Power that seems to be doing everything possible not to achieve peace, we regard with optimism any act that would facilitate Palestinian-Israeli rapprochement, such as the recent steps taken to improve the electricity situation.

We support the work of the Middle East Quartet and we welcome all efforts by the international community aimed at advancing political processes and talks with Israeli and Palestinian with a view to achieving peace. That should become the exclusive basis for the two-State solution, taking into account the Arab Peace Initiative and the right of Palestinians to live in their own State within internationally recognized borders based on the pre-1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, in accordance with the United Nations Charter and the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly and the Security Council.

Mr. Rycroft (United Kingdom): I join others in welcoming today's meeting and the briefing from the Secretary-General.

Since the Quartet's report (S/2016/595, annex) issued in July, we have seen a worrying acceleration of some Israeli policies in the West Bank that are, as the report makes clear, eroding the viability of the two-State solution. Far from stopping settlement expansion, as the Quartet recommended, we have seen Israel push forward plans for over 1,500 settlement units as well as the continued demolition of Palestinian structures. The numbers speak for themselves — over 800 structures destroyed this year, over a thousand people displaced, including over 500 children. As the United Kingdom Minister for the Middle East and Africa, Tobias Ellwood, made clear earlier this month, these policies fundamentally call into question Israel's commitment to the two-State solution.

The demolition orders issued against the Palestinian village of Sussia and Khan Al-Ahmar school in the east of Jerusalem are particularly concerning. Such steps would have a terrible human impact on the inhabitants of Sussia and the children of Khan Al-Ahmar. What hope is there for the two-State solution when communities are simply removed from the map and when futures are literally bulldozed to the ground? So once again I hope we can all urge Israel to cease its systematic policy of settlement expansion, demolition of Palestinian structures and limits on Palestinian development.

The Quartet report also set out the damaging effect of incitement and violence. We deplore incitement on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including any comments that could stir up hatred and prejudice.

Although levels of violence have dropped in recent months, we continue to call on the parties to do all they can to de-escalate tensions and prevent incitement. We also continue to support the revival of the Trilateral Commission on Incitement to address all allegations of incitement on both sides.

Turning to Gaza, we remain extremely worried about the ongoing dire situation there. It is estimated that 90 per cent of Gaza's water is not fit for consumption or even for agricultural use. Gaza continues to have the highest unemployment in the world. And the risk of a return to conflict hangs heavy over Gaza, as shown by the rocket attacks and Israeli response last month. Militant groups in Gaza must permanently cease rocket fire and other attacks against Israel.

The United Kingdom welcomes the steps taken by the Palestinian Authority and Israel to improve the energy, gas, electricity and water situation in Gaza.

These are significant advances that will improve conditions on the ground, and it is critical that these measures are implemented quickly, given the severity of the situation. We are also encouraged that education and health facilities have largely been rebuilt, even though reconstruction is far from complete. Efforts now need to focus on completing house-building and reviving the productive sectors, stimulating exports and creating jobs.

We too have a role to play. Donors must honour all commitments that are still outstanding from the Cairo conference. The United Kingdom remains committed to doing so and to reaching those in need. I would like to once again thank the Secretary-General for his briefing and reaffirm our full and continued support for the work of Nickolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Process. We look forward to hearing from him in our closed consultations later this morning.

Since this is an open meeting, before I conclude I would like to take this opportunity to publicly welcome the announcement on Friday by the United States and Russia that they would be renewing the cessation of hostilities in Syria. That is a long-awaited positive step. The level of violence has dropped in recent days, and I hope that will continue and bring with it full humanitarian access and, eventually, an environment that will enable talks to resume between the parties.

But we have been here before. In the past, the violence has lessened only to rise to new levels of barbarity. We cannot afford to repeat history. So let us all urge the parties to honour their commitments, and let us specifically call on Russia to use its influence to restrain Al-Assad. That will be no simple feat. Earlier this week, Al-Assad said that it was his objective to regain the entire country by force, something that he is unable to do alone and that would only prolong the conflict for many years to come. For the sake of the hundreds of thousands of Syrians killed in the conflict, for the millions upon millions displaced, that simply cannot come to pass.

Mr. González de Linares Palou (Spain) (*spoke in Spanish*): I would like to ask you, Mr. President, to convey to Foreign Minister McCully how pleased we were to see him presiding over the Security Council, and also to congratulate you and your team on your excellent stewardship of the Council this month. I would also like to put on record — and this seems to be a trend, whereby we see briefings turn into genuine

debates — that we agree that we need to change the traditional format that we use to deal with this or any other issue on the Council's agenda. We believe it warrants a collective decision by the Council and probably the devotion of a meeting and consultations to our methods of work.

That said, I would also like to thank the Secretary-General for his comprehensive briefing. We believe that it is crucial that we defend the viability of a two-State solution to the Palestinian question and, as Mr. McCully said, we have no time to waste. There is a very real danger that such a solution may soon be out of reach altogether. It is very worrying to see the destruction of Palestinian homes, the expansion of settlements and the serious humanitarian situation, which is not in Gaza alone. The stagnation in the peace process, which has lasted so long, continues to undermine trust between the parties. It is vital that we begin to create the possibility of the prospect of peace if we are to resolve the conflict before it is too late.

We are all familiar with the main causes of the breakdown in the peace process — the settlements policy and the use of violence — and we condemn the violence, acts of terror and incitement to violence regardless of their origin. Nor can we overlook the importance of solving the intra-Palestinian rivalries if we are to deal with the stagnated peace process. Spain would like to emphasize its full support for the French initiative for convening an international conference that would enable us to relaunch the peace process. My country is already participating actively in the preparatory work for it; for example, we just took part in a meeting held in Stockholm of a working group on civil society.

It is essential that measures be taken to restore trust, and we are pleased to see that some small steps have been taken in that direction, such as the agreement announced just two days ago, on 13 September, between Israel and the Palestinian Authority on the repayment of electricity costs. It is a small step, but one in the right direction. Similarly, the international community must take advantage of synergies between the various initiatives — the proposals of the Quartet, the French initiative and the Arab Peace Initiative. As the Secretary-General rightly pointed out, the general debate in the General Assembly begins next week, during which a meeting of the Quartet will be held, after a preparatory meeting in Paris, as well as a meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee. We hope that all of

these events and meetings will help to encourage the parties to return to the negotiating table.

Mr. Shen Bo (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I would like to thank the Secretary-General for his briefing. We appreciate his active efforts to move the process forward, as well as those of Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, Personal Representative of the Secretary-General. The conflict between Palestine and Israel is at the core of Middle Eastern issues and is naturally of fundamental importance to peace in the Middle East as a whole. The international community should have a great sense of urgency in terms of promoting peace negotiations and take more substantive actions.

The international community has recently come up with a series of new approaches aimed at settling the question of Palestine. In early June, the ministerial conference held in Paris in support of the Middle East peace initiative reached a preliminary consensus on how to promote the next phase of peace talks, and that has prompted the international community to refocus on the issue. We commend and support France's efforts to promote negotiations and peace. In the meantime, Russia and Egypt have also been working actively on the issue, and the Middle East Quartet has published a new report (S/2016/595, annex). China supports every effort that may help to ease the Palestinian-Israeli situation and to arrive at a two-State solution.

Right now, the top priority is breaking the impasse in which the peace talks are mired in order to work to establish an independent sovereign Palestinian State based on the 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital. That is an inalienable right of the Palestinian people. Both countries should exercise restraint, refrain from violent conflict, introduce initiatives that help to foster mutual trust, meet each other halfway and strive to resume talks as soon as possible and arrive at outcomes based on those talks. Israel should demonstrate goodwill by acting first to stop its expansion of settlements immediately, lift the blockade of the Gaza Strip and remove restrictions on aid to Palestinians. At the same time, Israel's legitimate security concerns should be respected.

The international community should increase its coordination in order to translate the current positive momentum towards settling the Palestine question into concrete action. We should stay focused on the central goal of all its efforts, a two-State solution, and work diligently to achieve a resumption of the peace talks,

with a view to achieving real results. We should draw on the experience gained through dealing with other hotspot issues in the Middle East by exploring every possible pathway to resuming talks under the auspices of the Middle East Quartet by creating international synergies. While we should continue to use the mechanisms that are already in place, we should also encourage new initiatives. Meanwhile, we should be mindful of the leading role of the United Nations in this issue, and any outcomes of the efforts to promote peace should be approved by the Security Council.

China has always been supportive of the Palestinian people's just aspirations to the restoration of their legitimate national rights and interests and has worked to promote peace negotiations. As a permanent member of the Security Council and a responsible major Power, we have contributed constructively to the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Earlier this year, President Xi Jinping of China delivered a speech at the headquarters of the League of Arab States in which he specifically discussed China's principled stance on the question of Palestine. He called for relaunching peace talks at the political level and promoting economic reconstruction. At the Paris ministerial conference, China's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, put forward the "three stops" and "three explorations" initiative. China has also been assisting Palestine, to the best of its ability, to help it revitalize its economy and improve the livelihoods of its people. China is ready to work with the international community to continue the push for an early, just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Mr. Yelchenko (Ukraine): I thank you, Mr. President, for convening today's meeting under this format, which is in line with our recent collective discussion on how to modernize some of the working methods of the Security Council.

Ukraine consistently supports the Middle East peace process and the principle of a two-State solution, with Israel and Palestine coexisting in peace and security. We are deeply concerned about the ongoing escalation we are witnessing, not only in the rhetoric of high-level officials on both sides but on the ground as well.

The shooting of a Palestinian man inside a refugee camp in East Jerusalem on 5 September, as well as

the exchange of allegations of ethnic cleansing by the leaders of the two sides on 9 September, does not serve the purpose of resuming Israeli-Palestinian talks in good faith. These facts do not contribute to restoring the atmosphere of trust between the two sides, so-needed in the light of the prospect for possible talks between Netanyahu and Abbas — in Moscow, Luxembourg or elsewhere.

The recent escalation serves as yet another reminder that the status quo is a road to nowhere. We strongly believe that both sides must demonstrate genuine restraint and refrain from the use of force, which will only fuel the violence and lead to increased casualties — all of which could play into the hands of extremists who are trying to undermine the fragile prospects for peace.

No one can reasonably argue that tackling this challenge is possible without addressing its root causes, as the unresolved status of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ranks high on the terrorist agenda in the region of the Middle East and North Africa.

The decision announced to suspend the Palestinian municipal elections scheduled to take place on 8 October is regrettable, as we believe that intra-Palestinian reconciliation is an important precondition for reaching a viable agreement with Israel.

We are convinced that the establishment of a stable, peaceful and democratic Palestinian State is in Israel's long-term security interests. However, the ongoing process of settlement expansion and the legalization of outposts could undermine the efforts of the international community to achieve tangible progress in the peace process.

Ultimate success depends upon a genuine commitment by all interested parties. Diplomatic efforts must be redoubled to contain and de-escalate the latest wave of violence and to unblock Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Ukraine remains steadfast in its support of any effort to restore the hope that a two-State solution can be achieved through negotiations.

The President: I now Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 11.55 a.m.